

Poem Series

Target Academic Level: High School, College, and Beyond

Lesson Overview:

After reading Lisa Hiton's *Afterfeast*, students will look closely at the poems "Dream of My Father's Shiva, Lake Michigan, 1963", "Dream of My Father's Shiva, Auschwitz, 1942", "Terra Vita", "Historic Stare" and "Historic Stair" in order to examine the use of poem series within a poetry collection.

Before Lecture:

Have students read "Dream of My Father's Shiva, Lake Michigan, 1963", "Dream of My Father's Shiva, Auschwitz, 1942", and "Terra Vita" out loud in this order. Next, have students read "Historic Stare" then "Historic Stair".

Lecture:

Similar to novels and films that have a prequel, sequel, or even a third installment, poets may create a series of poems. A poet might opt to create a poem series for a variety of reasons, like to provide more information or to discuss a topic using different perspectives, for example. In a collection, poets can choose to order a series of poems one after another, or they might choose to disperse the series throughout the collection, separated by other poems. In *Afterfeast*, Hiton chooses the latter with the poems "Dream of My Father's Shiva, Lake Michigan, 1963", "Dream of My Father's Shiva, Auschwitz, 1942", "Terra Vita", "Historic Stare" and "Historic Stair".

- One way that Hiton signals to the reader that these poems are meant to be read in a series with one another is through the poems' titles.
 - "Dream of My Father's Shive, Lake Michigan, 1963" and "Dream of My Father's Shiva, Auschwitz, 1942" use virtually the same title; the format and most of the wording is the same, and the only difference lies in the specific place and time given.
 - In "Historic Stare" and "Historic Stair" the titles are identical in sound, and vary only in the spelling/meaning of 'stair' and 'stare'.
- In order to signal to the reader that these poems are working with one another, Hiton also ensures that the body of each poem is in conversation with one another between "Dream of My Father's Shiva, Lake Michigan, 1963", "Dream of My Father's Shiva, Auschwitz, 1942", "Terra Vita".
 - In "Dream of My Father's Shiva, Lake Michigan, 1963", Hiton writes of a lake, stating: "I pull a body out of the lake and it's my size."
 - The poem "Dream of My Father's Shiva, Auschwitz, 1942" begins in conversation with this aspect of the last poem in the series, opening with, "no water," and, "this lake of bodies/ starts to freeze."

- The poem also directly calls to “Dream of My Father’s Shiva, Lake Michigan, 1963” through the simile: “you’re blue as Lake Michigan.”
- In “Dream of My Father’s Shiva, Lake Michigan, 1963”, Hiton places an emphasis on hands.
 - This can be seen in the lines: “I drag you across the beach... it’s easy because you grip my hand,” and “Your other hand is missing fingers.”
 - This emphasis continues in “Dream of My Father’s Shiva, Auschwitz, 1942” with the lines: “I hear/ you grunting/ when the plow’s hand/ snags off your fingers,” which seems to explain why the hand is “missing fingers,” in the last poem.
 - In “Terra Vita”, this continuity remains in the lines, “My palms/ red before callusing,” and “Oh god, you hath given me two hands/ but only one heart.”
- Another way that Hiton connects the three poems in this series is through the use of dreams.
 - This is evident, of course, in the titles of the poems, “Dream of My Father’s Shive, Auschwitz, 1942” and “Dream of My Father’s Shiva, Lake Michigan, 1963”.
 - This connection is also highlighted within the bodies of these poems.
 - For example, the lines, “there is something/ humming/ in the air of this/ thick dream,” from “Dream of My Father’s Shiva, Auschwitz, 1942”, and the lines, “maybe it was your dream/ and I was conjured to dwell there,” from “Terra Vita”.
- There are also images and words that appear throughout this series of poems that demonstrate their connectedness.
 - For example, the lines, “cutting/ through the pink smoke,” and “the lone smokestack,” from “Dream of My Father’s Shiva, Auschwitz, 1942” present images that return in “Terra Vita” in the lines: “I remember the worm.../ it has something to do with skin/ and pink smokestacks.”
 - In “Dream of My Father’s Shiva, 1942” Hiton writes: “I am/ at the steer/ shoveling/ bodies/ to find you,” and in “Dream of My Father’s Shiva, Lake Michigan, 1963”, “I drag you across the beach.”
 - Each of these images/ideas return in the lines from “Terra Vita”: “My palms/ red before callusing/ after working at a steer/ or dragging a heavy load.”
- Similarly, in “Historic Stare” and “Historic Stair”, Hiton uses echoes of words and images in each poem.
 - For example, there is the recurring usage of the word ‘ruins’.
 - This can be seen in the lines, “Away from the ruins,” and “Away from the ruins, more ruins,” from “Historic Stare”, then the lines,

“You were in another country/ while I was in the ruins,” from “Historic Stair”.

- There is also a repetition of the word ‘agora’ in each poem.
 - For example, the following lines from “Historic Stare”: “You identify everything/ by its rightful name.../ empty space that convinces you of a civilization: agora,” and, “I have to close my eyes/ to imagine I’m in the agora./ You are in the agora.”
 - This word is echoed in “Historic Stair” in the lines, “The broad stairs/ to the agora are uneven, faded smooth,” and, “the word soars/ out of my throat:/ AGORA.”
- There is also the repetition of the word ‘needles’ in each poem.
 - In “Historic Stare”, Hiton writes: “your arms pointing,/ pulled compass needles, to where you know/ we are going,” and in “Historic Stair”: “The ancient sewer fills/ with the rotgut of pine needles.”
- Hiton also mirrors certain images between “Historic Stare” and “Historic Stair”.
 - One example would be the usage of coins, in the lines, “the marketplace, baskets of flowers, coins/ passing through hands,” from “Historic Stare” and, “the bees/ spit up as coins,” from “Historic Stair”.
- In order to emphasize the link between these poems, Hiton also establishes a sense of place in each that seems identical to one another.
 - This can be seen in the lines, “the marketplace, baskets of flowers, coins,” from “Historic Stare”, and, “I wandered the marketplace/ purple-tipped lettuces, lemons, olive oil,” from “Historic Stair”.
- Similarly, Hiton also uses a near-identical sensory description in each poem to demonstrate an interconnectedness between the two.
 - For example, the lines, “At the historic stair/ you touch, I touch/ soft silk stone,” from “Historic Stare” and, “I put my hands on every curve,/ consider the masses, the feat/ of turning stone to soft silk,” from “Historic Stair”.
- Through the repetition of words, images, and ideas throughout each poem series, Hiton establishes the interconnectedness between “Dream of My Father’s Shiva, Lake Michigan, 1963”, “Dream of My Father’s Shiva, Auschwitz, 1942”, and “Terra Vita” and between “Historic Stare” and “Historic Stair”.

Post-Lecture Discussion Questions:

1. What other ways does Hiton signal to the reader that the poems in each series are connected to one another?

2. What do you think of the order in which each series appears in the collection? Why might Hiton have ordered each series the way she has? (“Dream of My Father’s Shiva, Lake Michigan, 1963”, then “Dream of My Father’s Shiva, Auschwitz, 1942”, then “Terra Vita” and “Historic Stare” then “Historic Stair”)
3. What is the effect of dispersing the different series throughout the collection instead of placing them one after another? How does this change your experience and understanding of each series?
4. What is the effect or advantage to creating a poem series, even in a collection that has longer poems and where all the poems deal with similar subject matter?

Writing Prompts:

1. Using the titles “Dream of My Father’s Shive, Auschwitz, 1942” and “Dream of My Father’s Shiva, Lake Michigan, 1963” as a model, think of a singular experience that you encountered in two different places and times. This can be seeing the same person at two different places/times, getting the same kind of stomach bug in two different places/times, or anything else you can imagine. Write a series of two poems where you structure your titles in this same way, but with your own information.
2. Have you ever had a recurring dream? Also using “Dream of My Father’s Shive, Auschwitz, 1942” and “Dream of My Father’s Shiva, Lake Michigan, 1963” write a poem series about your recurring dream. As Hiton does in her poems, try to have words and images that repeat in each poem of your series.
3. In “Historic Stare” and “Historic Stair”, Hiton uses the homophones stare/stair. Think of other homophones (ate/eight, one/won, meet/meat, etc.) and write a poem series that uses the homophones in the poems’ titles.
4. Like a movie that comes out with a prequel or sequel, series are useful for examining how something or someone changes over time. Write a series where you focus on the same thing-- this can be a person, a song, a piece of rotting fruit, or anything else-- and use each installment in the series to examine and discuss how the thing you’ve chosen changes with time.

Weaving Words & Images

Target Academic Level: High school, College, & Beyond

Lesson Overview:

After reading *Afterfeast*, students will examine how Hiton weaves words and images throughout her poems to create complete and cohesive works, especially when the poems are longer in length. The poems “The Space Between Trees” and “Dislocated Cities” will be used as reference.

Before Lecture:

Read the poems “The Space Between Trees” and “Dislocated Cities” out loud as a class, paying attention to images, words, and phrases that reappear throughout each poem.

Lecture:

Poets have a relatively small amount of time and space to make a poem feel both cohesive and complete. The poet must make the reader feel that they have a grasp on the poem the whole way through, and that they have arrived at a place where they are ready to release that grasp by the poem’s end. One way that poets accomplish a feeling of continuity and wholeness is by braiding in repeated words, images, and phrases into a poem. Hiton does this in *Afterfeast*, especially in the longer poems “The Space Between Trees” and “Dislocated Cities”. In these two poems, Hiton’s careful resurfacing of images and ideas serves to guide the reader through the entirety of each poem.

- For example, there are images and phrases that function like threads that weave through the different numbered sections of “The Space Between Trees”.
 - One example of this would be the words ‘garden’ and ‘tomato’ that appear first in section I. in the line, “Go into the garden and pick the tomatoes.”
 - The tomatoes return in section II. with, “Taste the sauce, I’m making it for you,” and in section IV. with the line, “in the window, you picking tomatoes.”
 - The garden returns in section IV. in the lines, “We built a garden but we forgot to build ourselves, ” and, “The map is a garden.”
 - Another example from “The Space Between Trees” would be the resurfacing of different versions of the phrase, “The world is never mentioned,” which appears in section I.
 - In section II., it reemerges as, “The word was never mentioned.”
 - In section III., the phrase becomes: “I want to say/ the word out loud.”
 - Finally, in section V., Hiton closes this thread with: “Neither are we/ love. There I said it.”
 - Hiton also plays with the line, “Call me from the garden. I want to make sense of it,” which serves as the ending of section I.

- Immediately after, at the start of section II., the line becomes: “Call me from the river. I want to make sense of it.”
- Throughout the different sections, Hiron also repeats the idea of a storm and flood.
 - This idea shows up first in section II. with the lines, “I’ll dig a tunnel for you/ where we can live secretly away from the light./ If the tunnel floods during August storms...”
 - Next, in section IV. Hiron writes: “It always rains on the lover before she dies.”
 - Finally, the idea of a storm/flood shows up one last time in section V. with the line, “water flooding in from the storm.”
- Another idea/word that Hiron weaves throughout “The Space Between Trees” is the idea of myth.
 - This idea emerges first in the lines, “I want to make a mythology out of the image/ in the window,” in section IV.
 - “Mythology” comes back in section V. with the line: “We are not mythology.”
 - Lastly, in section VI., Hiron writes: “There is a myth about love and I read it over/ and over.”
- Certain places also recur throughout the poem, like the ‘kitchen.’
 - This can be seen in section V. in the lines, “Leave me/ standing in the kitchen,” then in section VII. with, “I left mollusk shells/ on the sill in the kitchen.”
 - Thus, in “The Space Between Trees”, the recurrence and repetition of phrases, ideas, and images creates a thread that anchors the reader through the poem in a way that surprises and satisfies them.
- In “Dislocated Cities”, Hiron similarly laces certain ideas and words throughout the poem.
 - For example, the image of ‘rock’ and ‘stone’ emerges throughout the poem.
 - This can be seen in the lines, “we stand/ on opposite sides of a rock window,” “as though no history had happened/ through the rock lung,” “Another stone/ left unturned,” and “I ask where the right stones are.”
 - Hiron also establishes and repeats a sense of place throughout the poem.
 - This is true of the word ‘synagogue’ which appears in the line, “In the synagogue ruins,” then later in the poem with, “below the synagogue ruins.”
 - This is also true of ‘cathedral’, which appears in, “in the vast cathedral,” and, “You walk ahead of me/ into the grand cathedral.”
 - Certain emotional states and ideas are also repeated, particularly the idea of love.
 - This can be seen in the lines, “We have never been lovers,” and, “We will never be lovers,” that seem to echo one another.

- This idea also repeats in the lines: “where I do not feel/ love. When I had no love.”
- The idea of time is also woven throughout “Dislocated Cities”.
 - For example, the recurrence of the word ‘medieval’ in the lines, “at once medieval and contemporary,” and “the city of medieval air.”
 - Time is also evident as a reemerging theme in the repetition of ‘century’ in the lines: “natural as 11th century figures,” “air from the crypt below/ rising, centuries old,” and “photos you’ve brought/ from the century before.”
- Hiton also creates cohesion in this poem by recycling an altered version of the lines, “*You can’t get to Salonika/ without passing through,*” as the poem’s ending.
 - The ending reads: “You can’t leave Salonika/ without passing through.” “You can’t go back/ [to America]/ without passing/ [through].”
 - In “Dislocated Cities” the resurgence and recycling of different words and themes creates a sense of wholeness in the reading of the poem.

Post-Lecture Discussion Questions:

1. How might longer poems in particular benefit from this kind of braiding of images/phrases/words? Do you think this technique is still beneficial for shorter poems as well?
2. What were some other poems from *Afterfeast* that recycled information in this way? How does this kind of repetition change your experience of reading a poem?
3. How might you go about using this technique in your own writing? How might you construct and draft a poem that uses this technique?
4. Do you notice this same kind of braiding and repetition not just in a particular poem, but throughout the collection’s entirety? What effect does this have on your reading of the collection?

Writing Prompts:

1. “The Space Between Trees” includes the line, “Go into the garden and pick the tomatoes.” The tomatoes and the garden then reappear throughout the poem. Take the line, “Go into the ____ and pick the _____,” filling the blanks with whatever words you choose. As Hiton does, be sure that the words/images you’ve chosen resurface throughout the poem.
2. “The Space Between Trees” also uses the repetition of storms/floods. Choose a weather phenomenon-- sweltering heat, a tornado, a hurricane, etc.-- and use this as a recurring theme/image throughout your poem. Switch off between using the phenomenon literally and figuratively.

3. In “Dislocated Cities”, Hiton repeats different places, like the synagogue and the cathedral. Think of a place that has some significance to you, and write a poem in which the speaker keeps returning to this place. Get creative and specific.
4. In “Dislocated Cities”, the lines “*You can’t get to Salonika/ without passing through,*” return as, “You can’t leave Salonika/ without passing through.” “You can’t go back/ [to America]/ without passing/ [through].” Here, the meaning changes by switching out certain words from the phrase. Think of a phrase or line-- this can be from a song, a show, a speech, a friend, etc.-- and use this line as the poem’s title or epigraph. End the poem as Hiton does in “Dislocated Cities”, by switching some of the words throughout to create a new meaning.

Sharing Information in Poetry

Target Academic Level: High School, College, & Beyond

Lesson Overview:

After reading *Afterfeast* by Lisa Hiton, students will look closely at the poems “Kinzie Bridge”, “Dream of My Father’s Shiva, Auschwitz, 1942”, and “Dislocated Cities” to learn how figurative language can be used to offer deeper insight into a poem or a poem’s speaker.

Before Lecture:

Have students read “Kinzie Bridge”, “Dream of My Father’s Shiva, Auschwitz, 1942”, and “Dislocated Cities” out loud. Lead a brief discussion where you ask students to locate the figurative language in these poems.

Lecture:

As we know, poetry is a succinct form. Therefore, a poet must capitalize on each word and line to ensure that their readers get the most out of their poems. It can be challenging to give readers the necessary information about the world and the speaker of a poem without sounding expository or taking up too much space, so poets must get creative in the ways that they fill the reader in on the speaker/world of a poem. One way this can be done is by using information in figurative language.

- This is what Hiton does in her poem “Kinzie Bridge”.
 - Inside the poem that describes the speaker being hit by a stranger, Hiton writes: “He hits again, still no touch of my/ marrow of a cow spread on toast points/ four months ago in Boston./ A delicacy, the waiter told my aunt.”
 - While the cow marrow and the speaker’s aunt have little to do with the poem’s meaning, the inclusion of these details in the poem’s figurative language allows for a deeper understanding and, therefore, sympathy for the speaker.
- In the poem “Dream of My Father’s Shiva, Auschwitz, 1942”, Hiton uses figurative language similarly.
 - A line from the poem reads: “you’re blue as Lake Michigan.”
 - Previously in the collection, another poem about the speaker’s dreams about their father informs the reader that the father is from Lake Michigan.
 - Thus, Hiton uses information about the father as imagery/figurative language in the poem in order to give the reader information about the father in a prompt and exciting way.
- In the poem “Dislocated Cities”, figurative language is used to bring important information about the world of the speaker into the moment being described.
 - Lines from the poem read: “When I shoot through the glass/ column, the lens flare, the light/ so bright I see/ black and white/ like the photos you’ve brought/ from the century before.”

- Hiton uses the description of the flash's effect on the speaker's vision to connect to the photos mentioned.
- Here, image and figurative language allow Hiton to tell the reader about the photographs that are not in the moment being described, yet are important to fully understanding the moment.

Post-Lecture Discussion Questions:

1. What about figurative language makes it a good place to offer important details and information, other than the fact that it saves space in the poem?
2. What are other ways that Hiton or other poets you've read add important information into their poems in a concise and exciting way?
3. In drafting, how might you decide and plan the best delivery for more expository information? Do you have a process you find works for you?

Writing Prompts:

1. In "Kinzie Bridge", Hiton uses figurative language as a way to include a food that the speaker and their aunt enjoyed with one another. Think of a dish that is important to your family or you and another family member. Bring this dish into the poem using figurative language.
2. In "Dream of My Father's Shiva, Auschwitz, 1942", Hiton writes, "you're blue as Lake Michigan," comparing the father to a place that is significant to him. Think of someone you love and a place that is important to them, filling in the blanks of "you're (adjective/descriptor) as (place)," and use what you have as a poem's opening line.
3. We all know that feeling of being out somewhere and suddenly being brought back in time by a song, a smell, a name, etc. Think of a time in your life where you remember this happening to you. Link the moment of where you were when this feeling came over you and the memory it took you back to using figurative language like Hiton does in "Dislocated Cities".